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Assassination Panel Is Denied Funds

Martin Luther King Jr

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With its public hearings scheduled to begin Monday, the House Assassinations Committee, accused of illegal and improper operations, was denied its latest request for funds yesterday.

Committee leaders reportedly were angry over the recent controversy—including charges that one of the committee's informants recorded telephone conversations and stole letters—which has clouded the committee's request for $790,000 to complete its work. Committee funding, a spokesman said, will run out around Sept. 15.

However, the House Administration Committee postponed action on the request for funds until the select committee answers the charges next month and justifies the $4.4 million already appropriated for investigating the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. Newsday learned yesterday that the administration committee is looking into possible misconduct in the probes.

The public hearings, however, will go on as scheduled. The key witness is to be James Earl Ray, now serving a 99-year sentence for King's murder. Referring to the decision to delay further funding, Rep. John Dent (D-Pa.), chairman of the House accounts subcommittee said, "Let's wait until we see the media reaction to their findings."

Committee chairman Louis Stokes (D-Ohio) attempted to justify the request to Congress with a closed-door briefing Monday about the investigations and prospects for the upcoming hearings. While impressed with the new information about the cases, many members of Congress seemed to come away convinced that the results will do more to dispute old theories than to present solid new conclusions.

The committee leadership is reportedly worried about the effect of recent charges that one of its investigators, Conrad Baetz, instructed an informant to steal letters written by Ray, record telephone conversations with the convict's brother and spy on Ray's defense team. At a St. Louis press conference with Ray's lawyer, Mark Lane, the informant, Oliver Patterson, revealed his undercover activities with the House select committee. Lane accused the committee of illegal covert operations and called for an investigation by the House Judiciary committee.

Rep. Donald Edwards (R-Calif.), chairman of the House juidiciary subcommittee on constitutional rights, said that if the committee opened the Rays' mail and recorded their conversations, "It is clearly improper." However, he said that his committee has not looked into the details of the charges. Robert Blakely, the committee's chief counsel, said that Patterson's allegations "will be taken very seriously and will be investigated fully . . . I'm going to find out what happened."

Baetz reportedly was called to Washington yesterday for an explanation of his informant's activities. Patterson, who has been employed by the committee since January, said that he has received about $500 for expenses incurred when he testified before the committee. Baetz, he said, promised him an additional $900, which was to have been paid by a check made out to "David Rogers." However, the committee has not paid him the fee, Patterson insisted.

After the committee's closed-door briefing, legislators generally praised the panel's efforts. "They have done a creditable job and they'll allay some of the rumors that have cropped up," said Rep. Mendel Davis (D-S.C.), who led the drive to hold up the new appropriation. "As far as changing the course of history, I wouldn't say that."